

for Parents and Students

Spring 2003

Letter from the Commissioner

Dear Alaskans:

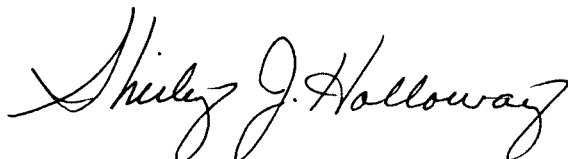
In 1997 and 1998, the Alaska State Legislature enacted laws that require the assessment of Alaska students to ensure accountability of Alaska's public schools. To achieve this goal, the Department of Education & Early Development established the Comprehensive System of Student Assessments as the primary tool for assessing the academic achievement of our students. The system consists of the Benchmark Examinations at Grades 3, 6, and 8, and the High School Graduation Qualifying Examination.

The examinations will provide student, class, school, and district information that can be used to help make decisions. These decisions range from specifics such as choosing academic areas in which a particular student needs tutorial assistance to modifying district curriculum.

This publication provides information that will assist you in understanding the results of the Benchmark Examinations. I invite you to spend time becoming familiar with the wealth of information provided by these assessments.

I hope that this information will encourage schools and communities throughout Alaska in their continuing efforts to improve the quality of education for all students.

Sincerely,



Shirley J. Holloway
Commissioner of Education & Early Development



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Explanation of Examinations and Scoring

The Purpose of Testing

The Alaska State Legislature and other elected officials have committed themselves to ensuring that all Alaska students have the opportunity to learn skills required for success in school and in the workplace. To ensure this goal, teachers, parents, and community members met to agree on the skills that students are required to learn at each grade level. The Benchmark Examinations are a result of the standards agreed upon.

There are three Benchmark Examinations:

- Benchmark 1 tests Grade 3 students.
- Benchmark 2 tests Grade 6 students.
- Benchmark 3 tests Grade 8 students.

How Results Are Measured

Students are tested on Content Standards and Performance Standards. Content Standards are broad statements of what students should know and be able to do. For example, in the Writing content area, one Content

Standard is that a student should be able to speak and write well for a variety of purposes and audiences. Performance Standards are measurable statements of what students should know and be able to do. For example, in the Mathematics content area, part of the Statistics and Probability standard is that students should be able to

- in Benchmark 1, use the terms “maximum” and “minimum” when working with a data set;
- in Benchmark 2, present the data using a variety of appropriate representations and explain the meaning of the data; and
- in Benchmark 3, interpret and analyze data found in newspapers, magazines, and graphical displays.

These standards were developed by Alaska teachers for Alaska students. To inform Alaskans about the standards, the Department of Education & Early Development has published and issued a booklet, *Alaska Standards: Content and Performance Standards for Alaska Students*.

Components of the Benchmark Examinations

The following content areas are covered in the Benchmark Examinations:

Reading

Excerpts from published literature are the basis for evaluating students’ reading skills. As students read fiction and nonfiction passages, interviews, poems, and articles, they answer questions assessing skills such as reading comprehension, identification of support for main ideas, and the use of techniques and narrative elements. Multiple-choice questions target specific skills, and short- and extended-response questions allow students to elaborate on and make comparisons between various aspects of the texts.

Writing

Basic and higher-order skills essential for effective written communication are combined in one test. These skills include writing compositions, using conventions of standard English (spelling, grammar, capitalization, and punctuation), and revising writing to improve expression. Multiple-choice questions evaluate specific aspects of writing skill, and short- and extended-response writing prompts ask students to write and edit narrative, descriptive, and persuasive essays on various topics.

Mathematics

Real-world topics engage students’ interest, provide context, and encourage confidence in their ability to do mathematics. Procedures such as estimation and mental computation are interwoven throughout the test. Computation questions are included, with many of them set in realistic settings to provide students with a sense of purpose. Reading, interpreting, and constructing graphs, and principles of geometry and measurement are also assessed. Additionally, students use different cardboard manipulatives (coins, geometric shapes, rulers, or protractors) for some items in the test.

Each content area contains multiple-choice questions with four possible answer choices. These answers are machine-scored. Short- and extended-response questions allow students to demonstrate their skills in more complex levels of thinking, and are scored by a professional staff experienced in providing reliable and consistent hand-scoring. Extended-response questions appear in each content area. All the short- and extended-response questions allow for full or partial credit.

Reading the Student Report

- A** Presents the student's name and grade.
- B** Explains the reason for the report and how the information may be used.
- C** Indicates the student's birth date and identification number (if any), dates of testing, scoring type, class, school, district, city, and state.
- D** Explains the student's performance relative to the Alaska Performance Standards established by the Alaska Department of Education & Early Development. The bar graph illustrates the same results.
- E** Lists essential skills, grouped by content area.
- F** Presents the Alaska Performance Index (API) that the student obtained.
- G** Graphs the student's API relative to the standard.
- H** Defines symbols and acronyms used on the report.
- I** Explains the API.

